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SUBJECT: UNAMI SRSG VISITS NAJAF

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On March 11, UNAMI Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) Staffan de Mistura made a quiet, one-day visit to Najaf, Iraq's holiest city and home of the much-revered Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The SRSG and Deputy for Political Affairs Andrew Gilmour provided separate readouts of the visit to us. De Mistura met with the Grand Ayatollah, his son Mohammed Ridha Sistani, Grand Ayatollah al-Hakim, Ayatolla Yaqoubi, and two senior Sadrists. Sistani praised the work being done by UNAMI and offered a strong personal endorsement of de Mistura. He was conversant with UNAMI efforts on the elections front and said he was pleased UNAMI has taken an active role in recruiting the remaining eight Governorate Electoral Office (GEO) directors, but believed they should have replaced the other 12 directors as well. Sistani said the Marja'iyah supported internally displaced persons (IDPs) voting and an open-list system. He welcomed UNAMI's assistance to Iraq in negotiating the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) with the U.S. Sistani lamented the human rights situation in Iraq, urged UNAMI to press the GOI to aid IDPs, and stated national consensus was needed to resolve the Kirkuk issue and hydrocarbons law.

¶2. (C) Summary continued: Sistani's son Mohammed Ridha echoed his father's sentiments, supporting UNAMI's expanded role in Iraq and voicing disappointment with GOI performance. Grand Ayatollah al-Hakim called for technical rather than financial assistance from the UN and international community, and addressed the need to open more Arab embassies in Iraq to support the GOI. The Sadrists, like Sistani, emphasized the need for elections, but focused much of their attention on encouraging the UN to put pressure on "the occupier" to withdraw from Iraq. Yaqoubi added his voice to those calling for provincial elections, praised UNAMI for their role in GEO director selection, and raised concerns over the possibility of a "mega region" in the south. End Summary.

FRAIL SISTANI FOCUSES ON ELECTIONS
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¶3. (C) UNAMI Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) Staffan de Mistura gave us the following read out of his quiet, one-day visit to Najaf. He was received by the frail-looking Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani. Sistani focused the discussion on elections, and praised UNAMI for taking an active role in recruiting the eight remaining Governorate Electoral Office (GEO) directors. Sistani stated UNAMI should ensure the integrity of the GEOs was maintained across Iraq, and voiced his opinion that UNAMI should have also removed the 12 directors already in place. He was concerned that UNAMI monitoring of GEO performance would not be sufficient due to the level of corruption throughout Iraqi institutions. He suggested UNAMI appoint less politicized "assistants" for the GEOs. Sistani expressed his concern that although the Independent High Electoral Commission was supposed to be independent, it was actually "shared" by the

political parties. He also stressed the importance of internally displaced person (IDP) voting. He said the Marja'iyah would back efforts to ensure IDPs could vote for the council in the governorate from which they were displaced in order to avoid demographic change. Otherwise elections would not be credible. Sistani also expressed preference for an open-list system, claiming Iraqis would boycott a closed-list election. He said there would be no harm in delaying elections a few months in order to prepare for an open-list system. He emphasized the Marja'iyah would never bless a faulty electoral process and neither should UNAMI.

14. (C) Sistani thanked UNAMI for its assistance in preparing the GOI negotiating team for the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) with the U.S. He asked that UNAMI emphasize to the GOI that 1) its supreme priority should be the interests of the Iraqi people; 2) all components of the Iraqi people should participate in drafting this agreement and a national consensus should be reached on this issue; and 3) Iraq should welcome international assistance in negotiating agreement with the U.S. The Grand Ayatollah lamented the human rights situation in Iraq, describing it as "miserable". He complained the U.S. often arrests Iraqis and holds them for two to three years without bringing them to trial or offering justification for the arrest, in addition to torturing them. He also called for Iraqi prisons to be monitored more closely. On the two contentious issues of the status of Kirkuk and the hydrocarbons law, Sistani called for national consensus. He believed there were constitutional mechanisms for the solution of Kirkuk and that oil wealth should be shared among all communities. He said UNAMI should act as an honest broker to help resolve both of these issues.

MOHAMMED RIDHA CALLS FOR LARGER UNAMI ROLE

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15. (C) Mohammed Ridha Sistani, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani's influential son, also met with the SRSG. He echoed his father's comments calling for a larger role for UNAMI, claiming there was no neutral party in Iraq except for the UN. Ridha was skeptical there could be any resolution to the Kirkuk issue any time soon. He said there was a "high wall" of mistrust among the Iraqi parties. He did not believe there should be a referendum on Kirkuk at the end of June 2008 or any time in the foreseeable future. Ridha voiced the displeasure of the Marja'iyah over the performance of the government. He said the Iraqis who had been encouraged to vote by the Marja'iyah have been let down by the poor performance of government officials whose main concern was their privileges. He concluded by stating he had great expectations from the SRSG and UNAMI in being more proactive in assisting the Iraqi people.

AL-HAKIM CALLS FOR TECHNICAL, NOT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

16. (C) Grand Ayatollah Al-Hakim, seen as allied with ISCI, told de Mistura UNAMI should appreciate the efforts of the Marja'iyah in holding back the violence in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on pilgrims last month. He said that violence is what is preventing Arab nations from opening embassies in Iraq, but their reluctance to be present in Iraq just encourages terrorism and killing of Iraqi people. He said there must be a real effort to support the GOI. He reiterated the importance of giving the Iraqi people room to stand on their own feet, claiming Iraq has enough resources and does not need financial help, but needs to find a solution to its problems by controlling its borders. He also said technical, not financial, help was needed in reconstructing the shrines in Samarra. Al-Hakim called for the UN to open an office in Najaf to provide more effective humanitarian relief.

SADRISTS WANT THE OCCUPIERS OUT

17. (C) The SRSB met with Sayed Hazim Al-Araji and Dr. Asma' Al-Mosawi of the Sadrist Trend. The Sadrists joined the chorus of appreciation for UNAMI's efforts in Iraq. They asked for UNAMI's help in pressuring the "occupier" to withdraw from Iraq. It was because of this occupying force that the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS), although not a political party, felt it should be involved in politics. Turning to elections, they expressed their belief that a lot of damage had been inflicted on the Iraqi community as a result of the behavior of the current provincial governments.

They stated that the people now understand better the importance of provincial elections and that the Sadr Trend is ready to cooperate with UNAMI to ensure the independence of the IHEC. Sadrists support federalism, but implementation in establishing regions would depend on the stability in the country. They are concerned the US and Iran want to influence new regions that might lead to the disintegration of Iraq on ethnic and sectarian grounds. They voiced strong reservations on the SFA negotiations between the GOI and USG because they are taking place behind the scenes and without involvement of the Council of Representatives. They also contended that the Prime Minister has violated the constitution by requesting an extension of the presence of the "occupying forces". The Sadrists accuse the government, assisted by the U.S., of violating human rights by attacking civilians and arresting Sadrists and keeping them in jail despite the amnesty and the decision of the Iraqi courts. They claim the Sadrist Trend is being targeted by other parties on a political basis.

YAQOUBI APPRECIATES ROLE OF UNAMI

18. (C) Ayatollah Yaqoubi, the religious leader with closest ties to the Fadhila (Virtue) Party, told de Mistura that the Marja'ia were supportive of all political parties, and that he had given advice to the Prime Minister on ensuring participation of minority parties that did not win representation in the CoR. In general, he was confident that the solution to all of Iraq's problems was in the hands of the Iraqis, but that they would need the UN and the Arab League to urge those in power to stay flexible. Yaqoubi voiced concern over the reluctance on the part of the GOI to continue to pay the Awakening Movements. He said they have played an important role in "calming down the hot spots", but the government has paid them only one month salary. Yaqoubi endorsed the role of the UN in the GEO selection process and stressed the importance of provincial elections. He criticized Vice President Adel Abdel Mehdi's veto of the Provincial Powers Law and also expressed concern over the possible formation of a "mega region" on the grounds that

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some governorates would fear being swept away by other governorates. De Mistura took this as a veiled reference to ISCI's control over Najaf as opposed to Fadhila's stronger influence in Basrah.

DE MISTURA'S COMMENTS

19. (C) De Mistura believes this was an important visit for UNAMI and one that needs more follow up. UNAMI has appointed its first Governorate Liaison Officer who will have an office in the Najaf governorate building and liaise with provincial authorities, national officers from the UN country team, and a wide range of political, religious and civil society interlocutors. He is also considering part time deployment of a UNAMI Military Advisor to Najaf, and would like much more frequent visits by UNAMI colleagues from the political and humanitarian sections. De Mistura believes the improving security situation in Najaf will permit this increased interaction. Gilmour told us in a separate meeting that de Mistura had made a strong positive impression on Sistani, who

at the end of their meeting was unusually effusive in praising the qualities and skills that the UN SRSG was bringing to bear in assisting Iraq to solve its problems.
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